

The Affects of Irish Immigration on the Illinois Valley and La Salle County

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The Irish, traditionally recognized for their contributions to the development of the Catholic Church in the Illinois Valley, did much more than that for the communities of the area. Besides their immense contributions to the development of religion, the Irish also played an important role in the development of the area's economy. It was, and many times still is, the Irish businessmen who run the local businesses. Many of the Irish traditions still play an important part in the everyday life of the people. The tradition of the Saint Patrick's Day Parade is, of course, Irish, but it is not the only Irish holiday and tradition which the area celebrates. Many of the very traditional architectural styles you see on houses of the area are from the Irish. For instance, the traditional Georgian style seen on so many houses in Peru, is a traditional Irish style of building. The immigration of the Irish affected the development of the area's traditions, architecture, religion, and economics in a variety of ways.

The affects of the Irish immigration were very important. Many of the area's leading businessmen were either Irish immigrants themselves or the sons of immigrants from Ireland. William Stone Cherry was an immigrant from Ireland who ran one of the local mines. He became a government official of Streator later in his life. Another man who affected the development of La Salle County businesses was Samuel R. McFeely, who was the vice president of the J C. Ames Lumber Company that is responsible for the building of many of the area's businesses and churches. J. B. Bailey, the area's main horse

and carriage supplier, was an Irish immigrant. Perhaps the most influential Irishman was William F. McNamara, who became the mayor of La Salle at the age of thirty-two. His parents brought him to La Salle as a small child and he grew up to be one of the most influential politicians in the area. The town blacksmith in the 1850s was an Irishman by the name of Jeremiah Collins. Jeremiah was a member of the school board for eighteen years, and contributed greatly to the development of many of the area's public schools. These men and many others of the area were Irishmen who had a profound affect on the political, educational, and economical development of the area.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the Irish was the development of the Catholic faith. One of the major Catholic churches of the area is still St. Patrick's in La Salle. Another church established by the Irish Catholics was Immaculate Conception in Streator. This area has many people of the Catholic faith. One of the main reasons for this is the many Catholic priests that immigrated here from Ireland. One priest was Rev. Henry A. O'Kelly who was the pastor of many of the area's local churches including Immaculate Conception. The Irish people's strong Catholic beliefs were very important to the religious development of the area.

Many of the traditions of today result from the Irish. The two most notable Irish traditions of the area are May Day and St. Patrick's Day. May Day, traditionally celebrated on May 1st, is actually an Irish holiday. May Day was originally held on May 12th, to celebrate the start of summer. In Ireland, as in the Illinois Valley, it was a tradition to set flowers on the doorsteps of the neighboring house. The tradition of St. Patrick's Day is a very important Irish holiday. In Ireland, St. Patrick's Day is a holy day held in reverence by all the people, but it was not until the seventeenth century that the

parades started. The Irish reverence of this saint led to the tradition of the area to hold a parade every year on the feast of St. Patrick.

The Irish affect on architecture is one of their most noticeable contributions. For instance, the area's main public high-school, La Salle-Peru, is a scaled down version of the Queen's University, one of the most famous buildings in Ireland. One of the most notable influences of the Irish on the area's architecture is the many Georgian style buildings seen in town. Many of the houses and old businesses contain this architectural style. The John L. McCormick House on Pike Street and the Brady House on Airport Road in Peru are classic examples of this style. They are built of old red brick, and the many small windows which mark a house as being Irish Georgian. The Ernest Gunther House on Second Street in Peru, built in 1853, is also a classic example. The old fashioned stone siding, framed door, and many tiny windows make this house appear very Georgian. Many of the houses on N. Bucklin St. in La Salle exhibit this type of architecture. These houses contain the traditional windows, doors, and the traditional square build of the Georgian house. Both new and old houses exhibit this architecture. The Helmig and Trovero Subdivisions contain many houses with this style doors and windows. The two most noticeable businesses that reflect Georgian style are the old Wesclox building on Fifth Street in Peru, and the old office building of Cams Chemical in La Salle. The Irish were also very influential in the development of La Salle County and the Illinois Valley. Without the Irish, it is very likely that many of the area's traditions would be different, and the main religion would not be Catholic. The Irish influence on architecture helped establish the traditional look of houses in the area. Finally, the economic and political development of the County would have been very

different without Irish influence. The Irish were a very important part of the development of the area. [From Elmer Baldwin, *History of La Salle County*; Donald S. Connery, *The Irish*; Mary Murray Delaney, *Of Irish Ways*; Brenden Lehane, *Dublin*; Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses*; Thomas A. Shaw, *Story of La Salle Mission*; Ted Smart, *Ireland—A Picture Book to Remember Her by*; *The Past and Present of La Salle County, Illinois*; *Record of La Salle County Illinois*.]